Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food

# Farm & Food Report

Communications Branch, Walter Scott Building
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## INDEX

BISON PRICES ON THE RISE, OUTLOOK IS STABLE.....06-36-162

NEW SOFTWARE TO AID WITH AG BUSINESS DECISIONS.....06-36-163

IMMIGRATION HELPS MEET FARM LABOUR NEEDS.....06-36-164

COUNTRY CRITTERS FALL FAIR ENTERTAINING FOR YOUNG AND OLD.....06-36-165

PAMI AIMS TO IMPROVE FARM SAFETY .....06-36-166

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Log Number: 06-36-162
Week of September 4, 2006

## BISON PRICES ON THE RISE, OUTLOOK IS STABLE

The Saskatchewan Bison Association says all signs point to the continued strengthening of prices for top quality live bison and bison meat products for the balance of 2006 and well into 2007.

"Prices in the United States have been quite strong and continue to increase," said Jim Warren, executive director of the Saskatchewan Bison Association. "Premium prices in the U.S. market drive the price in the domestic market, as well."

In terms of market conditions, Warren said all the signals are positive from the U.S. At the Saskatchewan Bison Industry Economic Outlook sessions held in the spring, the CEO of the North American Bison Co-operative, Rusty Seedig, predicted that his firm would be increasing its purchases by as much as 42 per cent this year.

Warren said producers are receiving $1.70 to $1.90 per pound, hot carcass weight, for youthful animals (those under 30 months of age).

"There's plenty of room for optimism," said Warren. He indicated that acceptance of bison is growing, with bison being added as a menu item at national restaurant chains. In Canada, for example, the Montana's Restaurant chain offered bison on their lunch specials menu right across Canada this summer.

Bison producers are subject to the same BSE export restrictions as beef producers and, as a result, accurate age verification is becoming more important.

"Producers should be registering their animals' birth dates with the Canadian Cattle Identification Agency," said Warren. "Age verification registration is available online, and it's a point and click process."

The website is found at www.canadaid.com, and information is also available toll free at 1-877-909-BEEF (2333). As opposed to registering each animal, the system allows registration of a total number of bison born during the normal 60-day calving season.

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According to Warren, there are now over 500 bison producers in Saskatchewan. "We have everything from people just getting started with 10 or 20 animals, to many herds of over 100 and a few over 1,000," he said. The Saskatchewan Bison Association estimates the total herd in the province at about 100,000 bison of all ages and types, including approximately 35,000 breeding cows.

At this point, the market breaks down into three broad segments: about one-third of the stock is sold to the U.S. as live animals or meat products, one-third is processed in Canada for sale to Europe, and one-third is sold into the domestic Saskatchewan market.

The Saskatchewan Bison Association is currently drafting a brand new production and marketing manual for bison producers.

"Initially, the industry followed beef production practices, but in the past 10 years we've developed quite a bit of new experience specific to bison," said Warren.

The new manual will pull together what producers have learned, and indicate best practices in the Saskatchewan industry. It is expected to be released in early 2007.

- 30 -

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## NEW SOFTWARE TO AID WITH AG BUSINESS DECISIONS

An innovative project under development at the Prairie Agricultural Machinery Institute (PAMI) in Humboldt has the potential to greatly help producers, entrepreneurs and even public policy-makers make critical agricultural business decisions.

The project is in the form of a multi-faceted computer program that takes account of a wide variety of factors and inputs to generate a comprehensive spreadsheet which calculates the economics of different farming techniques, product usages, business opportunities, etc.

Les Hill, PAMI's Business Development and Technical Services Manager, has worked closely on the initiative since its inception. He says the project is called the "Comparison of Whole Crop Harvesting Options," because the concept behind it is to enable farmers to make the best possible use of all products and by-products generated in the crop production process.

Producers will be able to see how a different farming practice, an alternate usage of a commodity, or a simple change in a single input might affect the bottom line of their whole operation.

"We've tried to put all possible variables into the program that can give farmers as complete a picture as possible when they weigh the options available to them or look at the value of their products," said Hill. For example, under what conditions might it be preferable for a producer to bale the straw and chaff left over after harvest for sale to a cattle operation or other commercial venture, and when might it be better to retain the crop residue to enhance the soil?

The software can also show producers how different farming techniques and practices might alter their profit equation. "Every piece of equipment can be operated differently. If you're a conservative operator, you might reduce your machinery upkeep and repair costs, but you'll probably spend more time in the field," Hill said. "There are tradeoffs for all of these kinds of decisions, and this program has the ability to maybe help producers find ways to do things better or cheaper."

But he was quick to point out that the tool will have benefits beyond just the farm gate. Entrepreneurs with agricultural business ideas could use it to calculate the viability of their plans and determine how changing factors might affect their profit margins. They would then be able to work with the numbers, adjusting different variables to see what it might take to make the venture successful.

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Hill said that tests conducted on the program so far have gone quite well. "We've been experimenting with different inputs, and it's all working very nicely," he noted.

Hill estimated the project would be completed by March of 2007. The PAMI team is continuing to add new data from many sources to ensure the program is as thorough as possible. They are also working to make the software as simple and user-friendly as it can be, which is a big focus of their current efforts.

Given its many potential applications and benefits, Hill said PAMI was very encouraged to receive some funding for the project from the provincial government's Agricultural Development Fund, aimed at supporting innovative research and development initiatives.

"The program can help in developing best practices for utilizing agricultural products and in making strategic business decisions," he stated. "If it can take an agricultural business venture or a farming operation over the line from losing money to profitability, I think it will be a very worthwhile tool."

- 30 -

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## IMMIGRATION HELPS MEET FARM LABOUR NEEDS

Finding reliable farm labour in Saskatchewan is not always easy, but producer Paul La Casse went a little further than most to find employees for his operation: to South America, in fact.

La Casse operates a 10,000-acre family farm in the Kincaid district, about 80 kilometres west of Assiniboia. He chooses his crop mixture based on "marketability and cash flow." This year, that means cultivation of cereal grains, peas, barley and brown mustard. He also has a significant acreage in pasture, since he is running a herd of 200 cows.

The La Casse family has farmed in the area since the 1950s, and Paul says there was never a time that they did it without some outside help.

"My mom was cooking for harvesting crews in the fifties, so I can never remember a time when we didn't have hired hands in our operation," La Casse said.

When he began managing the farm in partnership with his mother, Louisa, in the 1980s, they were still using mainly seasonal labour for seeding and harvest.

Eventually, he found that recruiting short-term workers twice a year was simply not efficient, and decided to employ full-time employees to work in the operation. In recent years, it became challenging to recruit and retain these workers, who had generally been young men.

So, in the winter of 2005, La Casse began to look farther afield.

"I read an article about a woman in southern Manitoba who was working to attract immigrants from Paraguay to work on farms there, he said. "I gave her a call and that's how things got started."

His conversation with Bertha Penner resulted in La Casse discovering a community connection between the Canadian prairies and Paraguay: the international Mennonite community.

"A large percentage of rural Paraguayans are Mennonite," according to La Casse. "That's the link with the folks in Manitoba."

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La Casse got in touch with Citizenship and Immigration Canada (now Service Canada), which conducted a job study on the positions he had to offer, and the issues with recruiting Canadian workers to fill them. With approval granted to offer the jobs to non-Canadians, his search began.

Over a period of about six months, he completed the required paperwork and began looking at prospects. "You have to remember that once Immigration is on side, you are just beginning," he commented.

He reviewed a number of candidates before deciding on two 29-year-old men. Both are married, and intended to bring their wives with them. "I felt that having a family unit rather than a single man would create some stability for them, and a source of support," said La Casse.

In August of 2006, La Casse and his family welcomed the two Paraguayan couples to Regina. One couple also brought their four-year-old daughter.

Their mother tongues are Portugese, Spanish and German. The La Casse operation has another hand who speaks German, and a neighbour who speaks Spanish, both of whom were instrumental in helping to bridge the language barrier. In addition, the new workers have committed to studying English, and La Casse himself is now taking Spanish.

The workers are here on 24-month work visas, after which time they will be able to apply for landed immigrant status.

La Casse says his initial experience with the new employees has been positive. He describes them as very hard working, industrious and, "in a word, 'respectful'."

They have been introduced to the local Mennonite community, which has embraced them.

In their native country, their maximum income expectation is about $300 per month, so the wages they receive here are an enormous improvement.

La Casse says the other important thing is that these are true farm folks, who understand and love the rural lifestyle. He is proud to have helped bring new families and young children into his community.

Will immigrant workers become Saskatchewan's new farm labour force? "I guess I'm the guinea pig around here," said La Casse. "My neighbours are watching to see how it works out for me. I expect that soon they'll all be asking how I did it, and I'll enjoy sharing my experience."

- 30 -

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## COUNTRY CRITTERS FALL FAIR ENTERTAINING FOR YOUNG AND OLD

Duane and Margaret Rose are accustomed to having strangers stop by their farm near Zehner, but they're expecting about 900 of them at once on September 16.

The Roses, who operate Rose Farm and Shepherds' Cottage Wool, are hosting the third annual Country Critters Fall Fair. Duane Rose said the fair grew out of a need they felt wasn't being served.

"It started as a result of three couples, friends, just sitting around saying how we need something to showcase our fibres," he stated.

The Roses keep sheep and llamas, and their friends have Romney sheep, angora rabbits and alpacas.

The one-day event welcomes farm and city folks alike. Those planning to attend should be sure to bring their appetites. Rose noted there will be up to 16 different vendors offering all kinds of dishes.

"We built a clay oven," he said. "We had built another one last year, on a trailer. I was going to put it away and it fell off the trailer. So we played in the mud for a while and got the new one ready."

Rose said the new oven will have a permanent home on their farm in order to stay better preserved. It will be put into use the whole day, baking up bread, cinnamon buns and individual pizzas around lunch time.

Because the fair is designed to be a showcase for the various wool fibres the farms produce, there are also displays of sheep shearing, sheep fitting for showing, fleece washing, carding, spinning, weaving, knitting and quilting. Other displays will include cow milking, butter churning, cream separating, and the sure-fire hit – home-made ice cream in production.

Horse and wagon rides will be running throughout the day, and children can expend some energy on the hay bale play structure or riding the ponies. The Roses will also have livestock on display, including sheep, chickens, donkeys, rabbits, alpacas, llamas, goats and cattle. Miniature donkeys will be brought in from near Kronau, and angora goats from around Saskatoon will round out the animal displays.

Admission for the day is $3 per person, which includes a horse and wagon ride, or a pony ride for children.

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To get to Rose farm, travellers should head to Zehner and follow the road for seven kilometres straight east. If approaching from the Pilot Butte area, the Rose farm can be found six kilometres east of the correction line where Pilot Butte Road meets Highway 46 (roughly 14 kilometres north of the #1 Highway). Signs will be posted along both routes.

- 30 -

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## PAMI AIMS TO IMPROVE FARM SAFETY

A multi-year project aimed at improving farm safety is now entering a new phase.

Over the past year, the Prairie Agriculture Machinery Institute (PAMI) has been developing strategies and innovations to improve the safety of used farm equipment, and is now looking to spread the word to farmers about what they have found.

Jim Wasserman, PAMI's Vice President of Saskatchewan Operations, said the project flowed out of a study sponsored by the provincial government's Agriculture Development Fund, Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, the Canadian Agriculture Safety Association, Alberta AgTech Centre and Bourgault Industries.

"We found that a lot of work was going into improving the safety of new farm equipment, but there was actually very limited engineering activity occurring with regard to the safety of used farm equipment," Wasserman said.

He stated that the first phase of the project was to determine what engineering activity might provide maximum injury reduction for farmers. PAMI used existing research data from Canada, Australia and the United States, as well as consultations with over 40 individuals from groups representing researchers, machinery manufacturers, regulators and farmers themselves.

A number of issues were identified, but the top four became the focus of the next phase of the project:

1. Improving guarding for used equipment;
2. Increasing the amount of rollover protective structures;
3. Improving access to guarding for power take-offs; and
4. Improving guarding for grain auger intakes.

Wasserman said all of these issues require easy and economical solutions to make a difference, since the cost and the complexity of corrective action is often a barrier to it being implemented.

An example of how the PAMI team overcame this challenge can be found in the handbook developed to help producers quickly and cheaply build their own guarding if it is not readily available in the after-market. The handbook, called "On Guard!," is written for farmers rather than for engineers.

(more)

"It's intended to simplify the process, which can be fairly complex," said Wasserman. "Through pictures and simplified instructions, we tried to make it something that farmers can access."

A similar guidebook is planned for rollover structures with a target for material costs of under $250. Wasserman said that product is still a year or two away.

"There's a lot of research to make sure we do it right, because there is potential liability associated with these types of recommendations. But we see there being huge potential, so we are going to work our way through it," he stated.

For the time being, PAMI has created a reference book for farmers to quickly determine which after-market rollover structure will work for their equipment and where they can get it.

Simplicity is also the main goal for PAMI's work related to grain auger intake guards. Wasserman noted that, if a guard is difficult to use, it often winds up on the ground rather than on the equipment.

"What we found is that standard auger intake guards were either bolted on or welded on, so if the guard was removed for maintenance or for storage, it was quite a pain to put it back on the auger," he explained.

The auger intake guard design that is available on the PAMI website requires no tools to move it.

"It basically takes 10 seconds to move it from in position to out of position, and more importantly, 10 seconds to move it from out of position back into the guard position," Wasserman observed. "Because of this, it doesn't wind up forgotten in the long grass."

An ongoing effort of PAMI is to determine if a manufacturer can be found to build the auger intake guards for a price point of less than $250.

The entire safety project is now moving into a new phase: getting the word out to producers.

"What we've come to realize is that, with every innovation, you've got to solve the problem and you've then got to get it into the hands of the users," said Wasserman.

"Right now, across Canada, in each one of the provinces, there is a least one farm safety association that deals one-on-one with the farmers," he added. "Part of this project is to market these innovations, thoroughly educate each of the farm associations on what we have available so that they can use a system that fits their province, and ultimately get these innovations into the hands of farmers."

Information about the safety innovations, designs and guidebooks are available at PAMI's website, www.pami.ca.

- 30 -

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